

# THE MAGIC LANTERN IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA

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## COMPANIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The rise of magic lanterns in the history of the Russian Empire is connected with the rise of education in the country and belongs to the late period when the liberal reforms of Tsar Alexander II started to show results. The number of literate people at that time was low, about 20 per cent of the Russian population, with the majority in its European part.<sup>1</sup> As such, a magic lantern seemed a powerful device for educational purposes. There was a sphere of public and private entertainment in Russia that involved the magic lantern,<sup>2</sup> as well as public lectures with magic lanterns for upper-class people. Sometimes schools could afford to rent or purchase the technology, but the most popular use of the projector belonged to a specific non-school educational practice called 'public readings'.<sup>3</sup>

Public readings represented a form of useful and entertaining reading carried out by an authorized person, who read aloud in front of an audience. It could be called 'delegated reading', analogous to the phenomenon of 'delegated writing' that took place in European countries at the same period among illiterate or semi-literate people.<sup>4</sup> Such readings were accompanied by magic lantern slides projected onto the wall. The content of these public readings was rigidly controlled by state authorities and aimed to provide the poor with a cheap and useful leisure activity, as well as a sense of political loyalty and some level of knowledge outside the school environment.

As a technological device, the magic lantern generated a whole infrastructure. In the Russian Empire magic lanterns were ordered predominantly from the United Kingdom, Germany, France and the USA, and these were in turn distributed around the country by many private companies in big cities. In the 1880s, some Russian companies started producing their own magic lanterns. One of the most reputable firms in Saint Petersburg that produced its own lanterns was The Workshop of Teaching Aids and Games directed by Alexander Erzhemsky, a member of the Russian Technical Society.<sup>5</sup> In Moscow, a company belonging to the Imperial Court and directed by Fedor Shvabe, a mechanic and optician, also specialized in manufacturing projectors (Fig. 1). In 1909, the main institution responsible for public readings, The Standing Commission of Public Readings in Saint Petersburg, was proud to present an opaque projector, the epidiascope 'Ermak' (Fig. 2).

There were many firms in addition to the companies mentioned above that focused on producing slides. Perhaps among the best-known belonged to Vera Berenshtam, daughter of Russian literary historian and Vice-President of the Academy of Sciences, Alexander Pipyn, and a niece of a prominent writer, Nikolay Chernyshevsky. Another reputable firm in Saint Petersburg belonged to an optician and mechanic, O. Richter, and was located in the building of the first private commercial bank on Nevsky Prospekt. A famous store of slides and magic lantern projectors was managed by Alexander Min, who went on to work with the



1. Advert for the magic lantern company in Moscow directed by Fedor Shvabe, 1897



2. The Standing Commission of Public Readings in St Petersburg advert for the 'Ermak' epidiascope, 1909

cinematographic company Minotaur and became a representative in Russia of French film manufacturer Eclipse.<sup>6</sup> In Moscow there were such famous manufacturers of magic lantern slides as E.S. Tryndin, S.A. Baranov and A.F. Antsiferova.<sup>7</sup> Among well-known distributors and manufacturers of slides in Kharkiv were D. Alferov, A. Verner<sup>8</sup> and many others, who took part in international industrial and educational exhibitions and won prestigious awards. In addition to trading companies, there was also a system of arranging auditoriums for public readings that had its own specifications.<sup>9</sup>

The infrastructure around magic lanterns in Russia generated a system of commissions for preparing texts for public readings and selecting slides appropriate to those texts. The bureaucracy of public readings also entailed an application procedure that required the name of the text and the leading reader's identity. The reader's voice was a matter of concern for the officials as it could promote undesirable ideas, even in legal texts, by emphasising particular words like 'freedom' or 'despot', so the reader's loyalty should be beyond doubt.<sup>10</sup> The application had to be approved by a school district trustee and a mayor, while the event required supervision by a director of public schools or another person approved by a school district trustee.<sup>11</sup> The strictness of the organization governing public readings was a reaction of the authorities to an alternative movement of readers who wanted to popularize socialist literature among the common people in contravention of the law.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the magic lantern projector became an important technological device that took part in the creation of an official public narrative and the shaping of national representation aimed at the common people of the Russian Empire.

## KEY TOPICS OF MAGIC LANTERN SLIDES

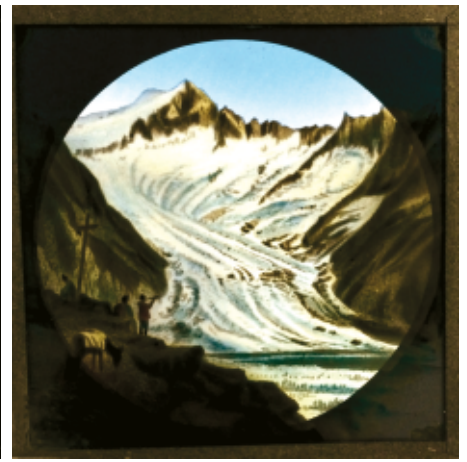
Public readings in Late Imperial Russia became an official and popular educational practice after the State Ministry of Public Enlightenment established the Standing Commission of Public Readings in 1872. The major idea of the Commission, directed by the mayor of Saint Petersburg Fedor Trepov, was to curb alcohol addiction in the city, meaning the temperance movement became one of the central topics for public readings initiated by the Commission (Fig. 3).<sup>13</sup> Often slide painters remain unknown but sometimes we know that slides were painted by very well-known artists. For instance, in 1898 a slide painting order was taken by Vasily Navozov, an artist who had graduated from the Russian Academy of Arts and a creator of the painting 'Free Canteen' dedicated to the temperance movement and charity in Russia. The slide depicts a man drinking alcohol with an angel and a devil standing either side of him. Although the temperance



3. Magic lantern slide on temperance painted by Vasilii Navozov, 1898 (Collection of the Musei Kino, Moscow)



4. Magic lantern slide of a hand under X-ray by The Workshop of Teaching Aids and Games, late 19th century (Collection of the Museum of the History of Photography, St Petersburg)



5. Magic lantern slide 'Glacier Sliding' by Alexander Min, late 19th century (Collection of the Museum of the History of Photography, St Petersburg)

movement put on many shows and performances, the generous support of the government was more an attempt to veil its own contribution to the problem than an effective regulation.<sup>14</sup>

Another important topic for public readings was connected with the popularization of science, geography, and medical and technical knowledge. The Commission issued very simple texts for readings about the process of printing books, about electricity, natural phenomena and hygiene.<sup>15</sup> Alexander Erzhemsky's Workshop of Teaching Aids collaborated with the Commission of Public Readings and issued some impressive slides that depicted a hand under X-ray (Fig. 4). Alexander Min was also famous for manufacturing slides about popular science: a beautiful series of slides about natural and geographical phenomena was issued by his company (Fig. 5). These slides could also be used as part of travel narratives about different countries – another popular topic.

Fictional stories with magic lantern slides took up a considerable part of all public readings. Although the popularization of national writers was very important for the officials, some stories by foreign authors were also adapted for public readings. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was among popular narratives that were illustrated by O. Richter's company. Fictional narratives aimed to represent Russian literature to Russian people and make canonical writers known among the poor. However, the real preference of such readers was represented by popular fiction about bandits and detectives.<sup>16</sup>



6. Magic lantern slide 'Robinson and Friday Watch the Savages' for a reading based on Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* by O. Richter's company, late 19th century (Collection of the Museum of the History of Photography, St Petersburg)

## BETWEEN NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL

By preparing fictional stories for public readings with a magic lantern, the Standing Commission aimed to introduce Russian writers to poorly literate citizens. Many brochures were dedicated to such recognized writers as Gavriil Derzhavin, Vasilii Zuckovsky, Alexander Pushkin, Nikolay Gogol, Alexey Koltsov, Lev Tolstoy, Nikolay Nekrasov and Fedor Dostoevsky. However they discovered that common people did not understand Russian classics properly and were not very interested because classical literature was never addressed to them, instead being aimed at upper-class educated people. Thus, the Standing Commission of Public Readings strived to adapt the original texts to the interests of the audience, often using a biographical narrative instead of a fictional one.

The catalogue of the Standing Commission's brochures for public readings demonstrates a variety of foreign literature adapted to an audience of Russian urban workers and peasants. The incorporation of foreign cultural concepts into the national psyche was one of the strategies for building Russian political identity.<sup>17</sup> Among foreign writers we can find Henry W. Longfellow and fragments from *The Song of Hiawatha*, Edmondo de Amicis with short stories about poor Italian children, Friedrich Schiller's poetry and his perspective on how to read, and adaptations of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (Fig. 6) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The strategy of combining national and western literature was important, not for the listeners but for the organizers of public readings as it was a connection with the authoritative western culture and educational movement of the Christian civilized world, which reflected the Russian educators' identity.

Sometimes the combination of world-renowned classical works with national identity took a bizarre form. One of the most reissued stories for public readings by the Standing Commission was *Elder Nikita and His Three Daughters* written by Alexandra Katenkamp (Fig. 7). This story was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, one of the most popular and widely



7. Brochure illustration (1885) for the reading *The Elder Nikita and His Three Daughters*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*



8. Magic lantern slide 'The Last Supper' based on Gustave Doré's engraving 'The Last Supper' from La Sainte Bible, late 19th century (Collection of the Museum of the History of Photography, St Petersburg)



9. Magic lantern slide 'Saviour on the Cross' and based on Nikolay Koshelev's painting 'Perforation of the Rib of Jesus by the Warrior', late 19th century (Collection of the Museum of the History of Photography, St Petersburg)

discussed stories in the press of that time. The main illustration accompanying the reading of *Elder Nikita* was painted by A. Serebryakov and used for slide reproduction. The illustration represented a famous scene from William Shakespeare's play *King Lear* – Lear and the Fool in the storm (Act 3). Whereas the original story depicts characters in grassland, the Russian adaptation of the scene has the peasant Elder Nikita and his friend Stepan caught in a blizzard. The picture was intended to be closer to Russian culture and reality.<sup>18</sup>

Another way of combining national and western ideas in public readings involved using magic lantern slide images copied from the works of artists from different countries. For example, a reading about the life of Jesus was illustrated by the company of Vera Berenshtam and the magic lantern slides were based on works of both French and Russian artists — Gustave Doré and Nikolay Koshelev. Doré's 'Last Supper' was interchanged with a slide called 'Saviour on the Cross' (Figs 8 and 9), which is a copy of Koshelev's 'Perforation of the Rib of Jesus by the Warrior', a painting that is located at the Alexander Metochion in Jerusalem.

The inclusion of foreign concepts into the official national narrative could be, on the one hand, a strategy to incorporate global processes and colonial policy of powerful Empires. On the other hand, it represents the Russian educators' conviction of the authority of western culture and the perception of Russia's provinciality in terms of the spread of people's literacy. Thus, western pieces of literature were used by the Commission as an instrument to support the legitimization of national narratives.

Pro-establishment campaigns using magic lantern slides were extensive in many countries.<sup>19</sup> Magic lanterns created an opportunity for poor, semi-literate people to absorb the cultural ideas of educated society without the actual reading of original texts. The strategy of appropriating ideas of high culture and repurposing them for common people was the guiding principle behind public readings in Russia. The state authorities strived to control not only the public readings but also the production of cheap books in general, which inevitably affected popular narratives.<sup>20</sup> Thus, public readings with a magic lantern became an important political instrument of soft power and nation-building in Late Imperial Russia.

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